

Choices Have **CONSEQUENCES**



We use the crazy straw to represent consequences because cause and effect are usually straightforward: if I do this, then this is likely to happen. Yet we often twist that simple path, convincing ourselves that somehow our choice will lead to a different outcome. Then we act surprised when the natural consequence arrives. Understanding consequences means learning to follow the choice to its likely end before we make it.

**Every choice begins a path.
Wisdom looks where it leads.**



1

YOU ALWAYS HAVE A

Choice

Guiding Question: Guiding Question: What choices belong to me, and how do I take responsibility for them without allowing my past or circumstances to make them for me?

CHOICE COMES WITH

freedom and responsibility

THE PRIVILEGE and the weight

The ability to choose gives us tremendous freedom. **It also means accepting responsibility for what we do with that freedom.** Our choices shape our lives little by little, and they often affect the people around us as well.

Wise choice-making begins when we recognize both the privilege and the weight of being able to decide what we will do next.

Two family dogs are given the same freedom. One stays close to its owner and can be trusted without a leash. The other runs off whenever it gets the chance, so it must be leashed and is taken on fewer outings. **Which dog has greater freedom?** The one that has learned to use it wisely.



YOUR PAST MATTERS

Past choices matter. Other people may have made choices that deeply affected where we started, what we learned, and what we came to believe. Today, we have choices of our own.

We can't change the choices they made. But we can take responsibility for how those choices affected us. This gives us greater influence over where our story goes from here **rather than becoming a victim to the past.**

SMALL CHOICES ACCUMULATE

We make choices throughout the day, many of them **so routine that we barely notice them.** What we eat, how we spend our time, what we say, how we respond, and whether we follow through on responsibilities can feel insignificant in the moment.

Yet small choices accumulate. Over time, they create patterns and those patterns begin shaping the direction of our lives. Recognizing the power of those small choices is where wisdom lives.

WISDOM ASKS US TO PAUSE

Some decisions deserve us to slow down and think beyond what feels easiest or best right now. Wisdom asks us to consider where a choice may lead before we make it.

OWNING MY PART

WHERE MY RESPONSIBILITY LIVES

MY CHOICES

say | do | pursue

OTHERS CHOICES

their words| their
actions

THE OUTCOME

never guaranteed

WE ONLY CONTROL OUR CHOICES

We control our choices. That's it. **Not people. Not circumstances. Not outcomes.**

Once we make a choice, **we release it into the world**, and from that point on it's **no longer fully ours**. Other people decide how they'll respond. Circumstances shift. Unexpected things happen, the meeting gets moved, the diagnosis comes back different than we hoped, the person we forgave doesn't change. We can weigh the odds. **We can't guarantee the ending.**

This isn't a small thing to accept. It can feel like losing ground, **especially when we've done everything right and the outcome still goes sideways**. But there's a kind of freedom hiding inside that limit: our responsibility was never to control the whole story. It was just to steward our part of it, what we say, what we do, what we pursue, what we walk away from, what we accept, what we finally decide to change.

That's the only ground we actually stand on. So that's where our attention belongs.

TAKING OWNERSHIP BEGINS WITH AN HONEST QUESTION

What part of this belongs to me?

OWNING MY PART - NOT THEIRS

Taking ownership means **clearly identifying the part that belongs to us**. Sometimes our choices contributed significantly to what happened. Sometimes another person's choices caused harm beyond our control. Many situations contain both.

When we absorb the responsibility or consequences that belong to someone else, **we interrupt the very process that could help them grow**.

This is often called enabling. It blurs healthy boundaries, shields the other person from reality, and slowly erodes our own dignity.

Maturity allows others to experience what their choices produce. **We can remain caring, present, and compassionate** while allowing them to carry what belongs to them. Consequences often teach what our rescuing never could.

CONSEQUENCES GIVE US INFORMATION

A poor choice doesn't have to become a permanent pattern. **Consequences help us connect the dots between what we chose and what followed**. They show us what worked, what caused harm, and what needs to change.

Mistakes can become feedback, but only if we're willing to look at them honestly. Examine them, and we learn what to repeat and what to do differently next time. Taking responsibility isn't the end of the story, it's what gives us the opportunity to make another choice, and then another, until wiser choices start building a different direction.



2

EVERY CHOICE HAS A

Consequence

Guiding Question: What is likely to happen if I make this choice, both now and later?

WHAT IS THE LIKELY OUTCOME?

IF →  → THEN

Every choice sets a sequence in motion. A consequence is simply what follows: if I make this choice, then **what's likely to happen next?** Wise choices require us to look past the decision itself and consider where it leads.

Simple, right?

We can't predict every outcome, but many consequences are reasonably predictable. **Slowing down long enough to ask "then what?"** helps us see the sequence before we set it in motion.

“ Why am I **STILL** dealing with this?

TWISTING THE TRUTH

IF →  → THEN

We often twist the likely outcome to justify the choice we already want to make.

This is where the crazy straw comes in. A regular straw has two ends: IF goes in one, THEN comes out the other. A crazy straw is what happens when we twist that simple connection **because we want a different answer.**

"If I speed, I could get a ticket" becomes "there probably aren't any officers around." We start playing the odds, minimizing the risk, inventing reasons why the usual consequence will pass us by this time. Sometimes it does. **And getting away with one unwise choice only makes the next one easier to justify.**

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Consequences can be natural, immediate, long-term, or unintended.

Some consequences happen on their own, without anyone enforcing them. Others show up fast. **Some take months or years to surface.** And some are ones we never saw coming when we made the choice in the first place.

That's often why a current struggle feels confusing. **We're standing in the middle of a consequence without remembering the choice that planted it.** Connecting the dots is tracing today's struggle back to a decision made long ago. It is what allows us to take ownership instead of blaming circumstances, other people, or bad luck.

One choice can create several kinds of consequences at once, unfolding in an order we don't always control. First comes the choice itself. Then the immediate response. Next, the ripple effects we didn't quite anticipate. Last, the outcomes that take time to surface. And finally, the full picture, the one we can only see by looking back. Looking past the most obvious outcome is what lets us see all of it.



THE COSTS WE CANNOT SEE YET



SHORT-TERM

There is a temptation that short-term relief offers.

Many unwise choices work in the short-term. That's part of what makes them tempting. Yelling can release frustration. Avoiding something uncomfortable can bring temporary relief.

An impulsive decision can satisfy an immediate need.

Time reveals what the moment conceals.



LONG-TERM

The long-term result can tell a very different story. The same behavior that brought relief today may damage trust, relationships, employment, finances, health, or future opportunities.

Something can accomplish exactly what we wanted in the moment and still be the wrong choice for the life we're trying to build.

Immediate
gratification can hide

*a much
greater
long-term
cost*

MARSHMALLOW EXPERIMENT & DISTRESS TOLERANCE

In the late 1960s, Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel sat preschoolers down with a treat and a choice: eat it now, or wait alone in the room and get a second one when he returned. Waiting time was scored from the moment the experimenter shut the door, and children who signaled or made it the full stretch without doing so were rewarded accordingly. Some children ate the treat within seconds. Others made it the whole way, and the ones who did rarely just gritted their teeth and stared it down.

They looked away, covered their eyes, talked to themselves, or turned their attention to something else in the room entirely. Researchers later described this as two systems pulling against each other, a **fast, reactive "hot" system** that wants the reward immediately, and a **slower, reflective "cool" system** that

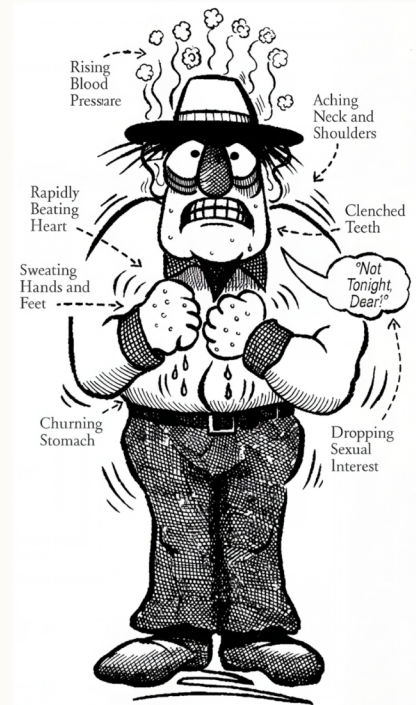
can plan and hold off. Waiting well meant finding a way to shift control from the hot system to the cool one, and **that shift turned out to be a teachable skill, not a fixed trait** some children simply had and others didn't.

That distinction matters more than the marshmallow itself. What those children were practicing, in miniature, is something we keep needing for the rest of our lives: **the ability to feel an urge, a craving, or a discomfort, without immediately obeying it.**

This is often called **distress tolerance**, the capacity to stay present with something hard without needing it to stop right away. It doesn't mean ignoring pain or pretending it isn't there. It means **trusting that discomfort is survivable** long enough to let a better outcome arrive, the same way those children trusted that waiting would actually pay off.

Relief and healing are not the same thing. Relief makes the discomfort stop. Healing usually requires staying in it a little longer than feels comfortable. Every time we tolerate a bit more discomfort than the moment demands, **we strengthen the cool system's voice.** Every time we relieve it instead, **the hot system gets a little louder** the next time around.

What was learned is that we can teach our brain which path to take.



The Need Cycle

Guiding Question: What belief, need, emotion, value, or desire is influencing the choice I am about to make?

EACH OF THE PRINCIPLES INFLUENCE THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Choices don't appear out of nowhere. What we believe to be true, what matters to us, what we're willing to do, our sense of worth or value, the health and depth of our relationships, and where we believe we're headed all shape what we choose before we ever choose it. The NWC principles describe these as inputs, the raw material a choice is made from, long before it becomes an action. What's happening within us eventually shows up in what we do. Scripture describes this same movement from the inside outward:

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Proverbs 4:23).

Wise choices start with attention turned inward, noticing what's shaping the choice before the behavior ever occurs.

Emotions and discomfort alert us that something needs our attention. Our brains and bodies are built to notice when something needs attention. Fear can alert us to danger. Anger can signal that something feels wrong or unfair. Loneliness can point toward our need for connection. Disappointment can reveal what we hoped for, or what we valued more than we realized.

Emotions are messengers, not managers. They carry **information** about what's happening within us, but they were never meant to make the decision for us. When we can tolerate the discomfort long enough to actually hear the message, **we create space to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting on impulse.**

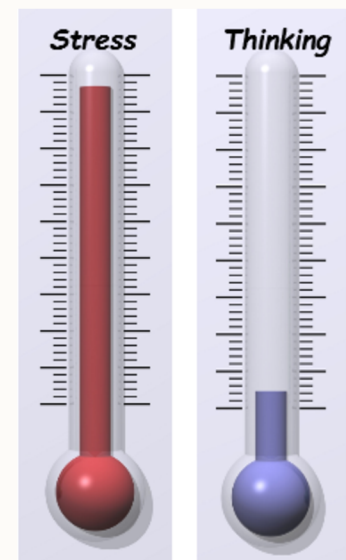
WHEN STRESS RISES, THINKING FALLS

These two thermometers move in opposite directions for a reason. When stress rises, the limbic system, the brain's alarm center, takes over, flooding the body with urgency and narrowing our focus to threat and survival. The neocortex, the part of the brain responsible for reasoning, perspective, and wise judgment, quite literally has less capacity to function when the alarm is loud. **The higher the stress, the harder it becomes to think clearly.**

This is why guarding our hearts matters so much (Proverbs 4:23), not because emotion is untrustworthy, but because **a flooded heart makes it nearly impossible to choose wisely in the moment.**

Paul described this same struggle when he wrote of a war being waged within his own mind, doing what he didn't want to do and failing to do what he did want (Romans 7:21-23). **That war is still fought today**, one stress spike at a time, in the space between the limbic system's alarm and the neocortex's wisdom.

Scripture and neuroscience agree here: peace isn't just a feeling we're after, it's **the actual condition our minds need in order to think, discern, and choose well.** Slowing down, through prayer, breath, truth, or simply pausing, isn't avoidance. It's how we step out of the war long enough to let the wiser part of us back online.



WHAT IS THIS CHOICE TRYING TO DO?

SATISFY

PROTECT

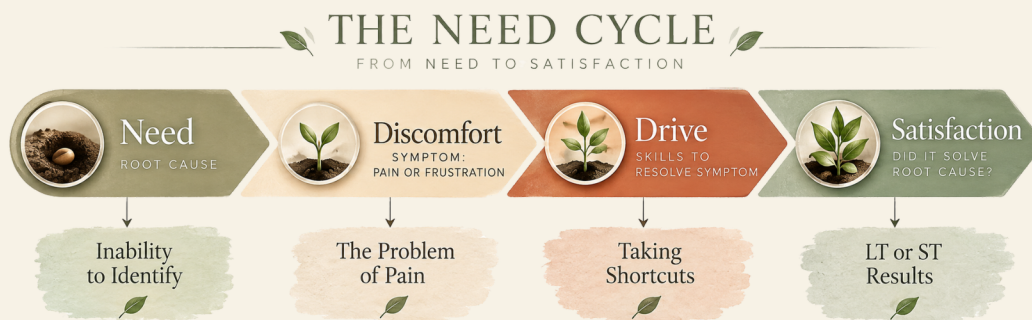
Every choice is attempting to satisfy, protect, avoid, or accomplish something.

Behavior makes more sense when we ask what it's trying to accomplish. We may be trying to feel safe, protect our worth, belong, gain control, avoid pain, find relief, accomplish a goal, or experience pleasure. Even choices that eventually harm us usually began as an attempt to solve something.

AVOID

ACCOMPLISH

This is why examining behavior requires more than asking, "What did I do?" **A deeper question is, "What was I trying to accomplish when I did it?"** That question moves us closer to the need, belief, or desire underneath the choice. Every choice attempts to meet a need.



Food is one of the clearest examples of how a need works, because we experience it every single day. But think about any need we have including emotional, physical, spiritual, or relational needs. **The cycle follows the same concepts.** The signals may look different, but the idea is to avoid taking short-cuts and make wise choices.

We need food. When that need goes unmet, our body sends a signal: a growling stomach. Most of the time, we know this need exists before discomfort ever shows up, so we take steps to stay ahead of it, planning meals, keeping food on hand, eating at regular times. **Emotional or relational needs also send discomfort signals.**

But if we ignore the signal, **it doesn't go away. It gets louder.** The growling continues. Then it can turn into something harder to ignore: feeling weak, foggy, dizzy, or short-tempered. The body isn't malfunctioning. It's doing exactly what it's designed to do, telling us that a real need still hasn't been met.

Our job in that moment is to listen. That's distress tolerance: staying present with the discomfort long enough to **understand what it's actually asking for**, instead of silencing it as fast as possible. When we skip that step, we're far more likely to reach for whatever's closest, a fast-food drive-through instead of the meal we actually planned for. The drive-through will satisfy the hunger. It just won't do it well. **It costs more**, nourishes less, and leaves us repeating the same shortcut again tomorrow because the underlying pattern was never addressed, only muted. **All short-cuts typically pay off immediately but store up long-term consequences instead.**

Our job isn't just to meet the need. It's to reduce our vulnerability to reaching that point of desperation in the first place, making wise choices upstream so the need gets met in a way that's actually good for us, not just fast. Meal planning, in our example, requires more effort as we have to plan, shop, prepare, and clean up vs. going through a drive-through window. **But the outcomes reduce our vulnerability** to both the immediate need and **future negative consequences.**

This is exactly how the Need Cycle works with every other need we carry, not only hunger. A need creates discomfort. Discomfort creates a drive toward action. And what we do with that drive, tolerate it and plan wisely, or numb it and reach for a shortcut, determines whether the need gets met or only temporarily quieted.

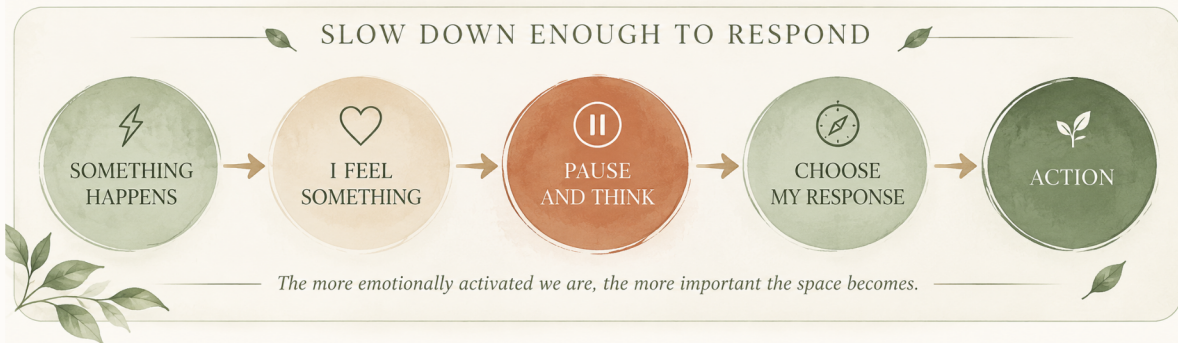


4

LEARNING TO CHOOSE

Wisely

Guiding Question: How do I slow down, tolerate discomfort, and choose what will serve me well beyond this moment?



Slow down enough to respond instead of react.

Something happens, we feel something, and our brain prepares us to act. A reaction follows that first impulse. A response creates enough space to think about what's happening and choose what to do with it. The more emotionally activated we are, the more that space matters.

Responding takes effort because it asks the thinking parts of the brain to stay engaged while emotion is pushing us toward action. It doesn't come naturally in the moment; it comes from practice. Over time, that practiced pause is what strengthens our ability to choose instead of simply react.

Scripture repeatedly connects wisdom with being slow: slow to speak, slow to anger, willing to listen, willing to consider our path. That pause is where wisdom actually lives. It's the sacred space between what we feel and what we choose.

Consider the whole picture: needs, values, options, costs, risks, and consequences.

A wise choice considers more than "What do I want right now?" We can ask what need we're trying to meet, whether the choice lines up with our values, what other options exist, and what each option might cost us. We can also weigh immediate, long-term, natural, and unintended consequences, the full range covered earlier in this workbook.

Sometimes a choice gets us exactly what we want in the moment while being terribly ineffective for the life we're actually building. Looking at both the short-term and the long-term is what lets us see past the urgency of right now to what the choice actually costs us later.



Learn to tolerate discomfort instead of automatically choosing what provides the quickest relief.

Discomfort creates a powerful urge to make it stop. We may escape, avoid, numb, lash out, give in, or reach for something pleasurable because our brain has learned that the behavior brings relief. That relief, however small, reinforces the behavior, which makes us more likely to reach for it again the next time discomfort shows up.

Growing in wisdom requires strengthening what the NWC material calls our "discomfort muscle." We learn that we can feel an uncomfortable emotion or urge without immediately acting on it. That gap gives us time to understand what the discomfort is actually telling us, and to choose a healthier response instead of the fastest one.



Continued Wisdom

●

Recognize when something beneficial has moved out of balance and begun managing you.

Many things we enjoy are genuinely good: relationships, food, money, work, rest, medication, entertainment, and countless others. Problems develop when we start using a good thing primarily to regulate discomfort or satisfy a need it was never meant to carry.

Consider something as ordinary as your phone. Checking it isn't a problem. It becomes one when a hard conversation, a boring moment, or an uncomfortable feeling automatically sends your hand reaching for it, not because you need information, but because you need the discomfort to stop.

The phone was meant to serve you: keep you connected, informed, entertained. When it becomes the thing you reach for every time something inside you needs managing, it's no longer serving you. You're serving it.

Eventually, something we were meant to manage can begin managing us instead. Wisdom asks us to notice that shift before it becomes the norm. Scripture calls this self-control: enjoying God's good gifts freely, without ever becoming mastered by them.

●

Accept the discomfort of change, and practice the wiser choice until it becomes a healthier pattern.

Change feels uncomfortable partly because familiar patterns require less conscious effort. New responses require us to stop, think, and deliberately do something different. The old choice can feel easier simply because we've practiced it longer, not because it's actually working.

There comes a point when we have to decide that staying the same costs more than the discomfort required to change. Then we practice. One wiser choice becomes another, and repeated choices begin forming a different pattern than the one we started with.

This is where wisdom stops being something we know and starts being something we live. Romans 12:2 describes this as transformation through the renewing of the mind. As truth reshapes how we think, and repeated practice reshapes how we respond, the wise choice that once took everything we had can gradually become simply how we live.



●

Reduce your vulnerability before the moment arrives.

Much of wisdom happens long before the hard choice ever shows up. The choice to sleep well, eat regularly, plan ahead, and keep our lives from running on empty is what makes the harder choice easier later.

A tired, hungry, isolated version of us will almost always choose worse than a rested, fed, connected version of us, not because we're weaker in that moment, but because we've made the moment harder than it needed to be.

The friend who snaps over something small after weeks of carrying everything alone isn't proving they're a bad friend. They're proving they were running on empty long before that moment ever arrived.

Wisdom asks us to notice what we can put in place now, staying connected, asking for help before we're desperate for it, so we're not relying only on willpower later.



● **Consider how this choice affects the people around you, not just yourself.**

A choice rarely stays contained to the person who makes it. What we choose ripples outward into the people who share our lives: a spouse, a child, a friend, a coworker. This doesn't mean we owe everyone a vote in our decisions. It means a wise choice takes an honest look at who else is standing in its path, and weighs that cost alongside our own. Relationships impact everything, which means our choices do too.

● **Ask whether this choice moves you toward or away from who you're becoming.**

Every choice is also a vote for the kind of person we're becoming. Beyond "does this solve my problem right now," wisdom asks a longer question: does this choice move me toward the person I actually want to be, or away from them? A choice can fix the immediate problem and still pull us further from our own identity and direction. Keeping that question in view helps us choose for who we're becoming, not just for what we want in the moment.

● **Seek wise counsel when the moment is too loaded to trust your own judgment alone.**

Discomfort and urgency both distort how clearly we see. In the middle of a hard moment, we are often the least reliable narrator of our own situation. Wisdom doesn't require us to have it all figured out alone. Sometimes the wisest choice is admitting we're too close to the moment to trust our own perspective, and asking someone outside of it, someone with distance, wisdom, and our best interest at heart, to help us see what we can't see on our own.

● **Give yourself grace when you choose poorly, then return to the process.**

This process isn't reserved for people who haven't messed up yet. Every one of us will choose poorly sometimes, react instead of respond, reach for the shortcut instead of the harder good. Wisdom isn't the absence of those moments. It's what we do after them. Grace lets us set down the shame quickly enough to actually learn from the choice, instead of spiraling in guilt that keeps us stuck. Then we return, again, to slowing down, considering the whole picture, and choosing the next wiser step.

*Creating Space Between What You Feel
and Where You Want to Go.*





5

YOUR CHOICES ARE

Building a Life

Guiding Question: Are the choices I am making today creating the person, relationships, and future I want tomorrow?

- Repeated choices become patterns, and patterns shape the life we experience.
- Our choices affect our relationships, while the people around us also influence our choices.
- Goals and direction help us judge whether today's choices are moving us toward the future we want.
- Our gifts, talents, strengths, and opportunities give us something valuable to invest and contribute.
- Our choices reveal and reinforce our character, identity, and values.



Every choice is a brick. Together, they become the house you live in.

1

Repeated choices become patterns, and patterns shape the life we experience.

A life is built through thousands of choices, most of which feel small in the moment we make them. One choice rarely determines an entire future. But the choices we repeat begin forming patterns, and those patterns eventually become the way we live, whether we intended them to or not.

This is why seemingly insignificant decisions matter more than they appear to. Small wise choices accumulate the same way small unwise choices do. Over time, they move a life toward greater freedom and stability, or toward consequences we never saw coming and never wanted.

Scripture describes this same principle through sowing and reaping. What we repeatedly plant eventually produces a harvest, for better or worse. The question worth asking isn't just "what did I choose today," but "what am I growing through the choices I keep making?"

2

Our choices reveal and reinforce our character, identity, and values.

We can say what we value and who we want to be. Our repeated choices are what actually prove it. The NWC principles place character, relationships, and identity among the outcomes of our choices, not the starting point. People come to know our character through what they watch us choose again and again, and every choice adds one more line to the story of who we're becoming.

Character develops through practice, not through good intentions. Choosing honesty strengthens honesty. Practicing responsibility strengthens responsibility. Choosing courage when fear would rather we retreat makes courage more available the next time it's needed. Our choices don't just reveal who we are today. They participate in shaping who we become tomorrow, one small, repeated decision at a time.

Consequences

3 **Our choices affect our relationships, while the people around us also influence our choices.**

Choices rarely affect only the person making them. What we say, how we behave, whether we keep our word, and how we respond to others either strengthens or weakens the trust between us. Every choice sends a ripple into the lives closest to us, whether we notice it happening or not.

Influence travels the other direction too. The people around us can encourage wise choices or quietly reinforce unhealthy ones. As our choices change, some relationships change with them, and the people closest to us often have more say than we realize over what starts to feel normal, acceptable, and possible.

4 **Goals and direction help us judge whether today's choices are moving us toward the future we want.**

Knowing where we want to go gives us a way to evaluate what we're doing today. A choice can feel good, solve an immediate problem, or satisfy a desire in the moment, and still quietly move us away from the future we say we want.

Think of the future as a tree, and today's choices as its roots. Everything visible above the ground, the branches, the fruit, the shade it provides, is being supported by what we repeatedly establish underneath it, out of sight. The original NWC material uses this image to ask us to picture the future we want, and then identify the choices it will actually take to grow it.

Wisdom learns to keep asking one question: does this choice move me toward the life I'm trying to build, or just away from the discomfort of this moment?

5 **Our gifts, talents, strengths, and opportunities give us something valuable to invest and contribute.**

Building a life involves more than avoiding poor choices. We've also been entrusted with abilities, experiences, strengths, time, relationships, resources, and opportunities, all of it capable of being developed or left dormant. What we choose to do with them becomes part of the life we build and the impact we leave behind long after we're gone.

Scripture consistently describes what we've been given as something to steward, not simply something to own. Ephesians 2:10 reminds us that we are God's workmanship, created for good works prepared for us in advance. Our choices decide whether our gifts stay locked up as potential, or become something we actively put to use for the good of the people around us.

Day by day, choice by choice, we are building something. The question is whether the life taking shape matches the life we actually intend to build.

Don't grow weary in doing good, for in time,
if we don't give up, we'll reap a harvest.

Galatians 6:9

